

Ornament on French Empire Silver

by Karolina Stefanski

Silver ornamentation during the French Empire period (1804-1814) blended Greek, Egyptian, Etruscan, and Roman decorative motifs with the taste and fashions of French bourgeois society not only during, but for decades following the period.

Napoleon Bonaparte's chief architects and decorative art advisors Charles Percier (1764-1838) and Pierre François Leonard Fontaine (1764-1838) were the founding fathers and greatest proponents of this Empire style.

After the fall of the French Regime, the short transitional Directoire (1795-1799) and Consulat (1799-1804) periods characterized the First French Republic. Napoleon introduced the First French Empire in 1804, which presented new fashions in dress, architecture, as well as the fine and decorative arts.

The traditional silversmithing system changed with the Revolution. The former guild system, which required a long apprenticeship and the creation and presentation of a *chef d'oeuvre* in order to become a master silversmith was abandoned in favor of a liberal system that offered everyone the possibility of conducting silversmithing business without any credentials or apprenticeship.

This resulted in a monopolistic commerce structure during the First Empire. Three companies dominated the French silversmithing market at that time: Henry Auguste (1759-1816), Martin Guillaume Biennais (1764-1843), and Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odiot (1763-1850). They employed workers who each specialized in a task for efficacy. Reports show that Biennais transformed his business into a company of more than 300 employees at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ Often these dominating silversmiths produced items for the Emperor, his family, and as political gifts. Smaller silversmith ateliers produced silver for the bourgeoisie, the new social class that emerged from the Revolution.

Biennais began his career as a maker of small luxurious wooden items such as chessboards and jewel cases. But he soon realized the benefits of the new system that allowed him to extend his business to silversmithing. He made a traveling case on credit for Napoleon before the campaign to Egypt in 1798. Napoleon's appreciation was evident when upon return he placed more orders with Biennais and appointed him as the "Orfèvre officiel de l'Empereur" (First Silversmith to the Emperor) in 1801.²

Silver was one of the most popular manifestations of artistry to display the Empire's new taste. This First Empire style was in essence a continuation of the Louis XVI style that began during



Fig. 1. Nef of the Empress by Henry Auguste (1759-1816), vermeil, Paris, 1804. A decorative piece in the shape of a ship that serves as the holder of table napkins and condiments used by kings in France. It confirms the king's and Queen's presence at the table. Napoleon adapted this tradition to keep the continuity with France's monarchy. Photograph courtesy of Musée du Château de Fontainebleau.



◀ Fig. 2. Water jug by Henry Auguste (1759-1816), vermeil, Paris, 1804. This piece depicts the Winged Victory as the handle of the jug. Photograph courtesy of Musée du Château de Fontainebleau.



Fig. 3. (Above) Cup in the form of a breast of Pauline Borghèse by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odier (1763-1850), vermeil, Paris, circa 1810. This unique piece has only one central decorative motif, the butterfly. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs.



Fig. 4. Water basin by Philippe Jean-Baptiste Huguet (active 1800-1816), vermeil, Paris, 1798-1809. This piece depicts dolphins as a repeated decorative motif, emphasizing its function to hold water. Photograph courtesy of Musée National du Château de Malmaison et Bois-Préau.

the mid-eighteenth century and was characterized by a return to the period of Classical antiquity. This was initially due to the discovery of the ruins of Herculaneum (1738), Pompeii (1748), and the Egyptian campaign (1798-1801), which was also a source of influence on the popularity of the Egyptian ornaments in French Empire design.

Napoleon traveled accompanied by writers, artists, scientists, and researchers who investigated and documented the natural history, politics, and arts of Egypt. One of them, Dominique Vivant Denon (1747-1825), who was later appointed by Napoleon to the office of director general of the museum Napoleon (that changed its name to the Musée du Louvre), collected sketches, drawings, and literary works of the Egyptian architecture and details that he published in his *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Egypte* ("Journey in Lower and Upper Egypt") in 1802. His work had an imperative effect on, and was the main cause of the revival of the Egyptian motifs in Western decorative arts and architecture. Figure 9 displays the Egyptian head as the handle of the cruet holder and the most distinct decorative motif.

In addition, the theories of German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) contributed to those foundations of neoclassicism. The French Empire style represents a luxurious homogeneity in every field of art and craftsmanship, including interior design and architecture.

With silver, this style is characterized by objects of simple classical forms and straight lines that originated during the Greco-Roman period and were inspired by Greek mythology. French Empire silver of this period is generally produced of vermeil (gilded silver) to underline the splendor of the wealth during that era.

Vermeil was a very popular method of applying a thin layer of gold (gilding) onto sterling silver and other metal pieces commonly used during the First Empire to emphasize their extravagance and wealth. At that time, vermeil was achieved by the process of fire-gilding. In this process, a paste of gold and mercury was spread over the silver piece, then heated, fusing the gold to the surface of the piece, the mercury evaporating. This type of procedure was banned in France because of its toxicity of mercury fumes

involved that blinded many artisans. The fire-gilding process was later replaced by the process of electrolysis, a method of using electric current to steer a chemical reaction. The silver piece was placed in an electric solution/bath that coated it with a thin layer of gold through the help of an electric field and electrodes.

French Empire decorative motifs were created in bas-relief or as three-dimensional sculptures. The First Empire is essentially an era of nationalism and military glory. Therefore, laurel wreaths, eagles, and winged Victories dressed in Greek and Roman garments are ubiquitous.

Many forms of silver objects were based on models of ancient Greek ceramics. The most common forms of First Empire silver were produced in the shapes of amphora, cantharus, craters, kylix, oinochoes, pithos, and rhytons. There were exceptions to this rule (such as the *nefs*³ in Figure 1 that continued the same form since the Middle Ages). The structure of silver objects was made up of vast polished surfaces, on which were attached symmetrical ornaments through riveting, unlike the traditional way of



Fig. 5. Water basin by Henry Auguste (1759-1816), vermeil, Paris, 1804. This basin depicts swans as the central motif of the piece underlying its function of carrying water. Photograph courtesy of Musée du Château de Fontainebleau.



Fig. 6. Sugar bowl by Jacques-Gabriel-André Bompard (active 1798-1838), silver, crystal, Paris, 1803-1804. This sugar bowl prominently features the butterfly as decorative motif as the handle of the cover of the sugar bowl. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris/Jean Tholance.

soldering that was popular during the previous period.

Ornamental forms can be divided into two distinct types: ornament as a central subject and ornament as a peripheral subject. Both served as a role to show something specific, immediately visible and definite. The winged goddess of Victory (Figure 2), for example, which is a clear symbol of triumph, showed this immediate function. At the same time, ornamental forms represented something implicit and invisible at first glance. Psyche, represented as a butterfly (Figure 3), is an allegory symbolizing the human soul and its transformations. Its representation is invisible at first sight, suggesting a secondary function.⁴

These ornamental subjects are often glorifying military victory or referencing to Greco-Roman mythology, referring to the society's caprices of that era. The most representational myths in the language of the French Empire style are the ones of Apollo, Bacchus, Jupiter, and Psyche. A dichotomy is visible in the

juxtaposition of Apollo (representing order and morality) and Bacchus (representing chaos and desire).

The peripheral subject is generally always applied in a particular rhythm, usually geometric or natural. Its function is to be purely ornamental, to act as a frame for the object and to reinforce the edges of the silver piece. For example, the water leaves on the pedestal of the coffee pot, part of a tea service by Marc Jacquart (in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), have a purely ornamental function that frames the pedestal but also serves as reinforcement of the silver piece.

Certain silver objects introduce central subjects in a repetitive way, underlining the object's function. The water basin illustrated in Figure 4 shows the dolphin, a central subject, but repeats it in a fret pattern enclosing the entire basin. This representation intensifies the function of the piece, which was to hold large amounts of water.

According to Napoleon's architects and the era's trendsetters, Percier and Fontaine, the choice of a particular decorative motif always corresponds to the function of the object.⁵ A marine monster or any aquatic topic is always linked to large containers, underlining the abundance of water. For this reason, we find marine monsters and water lilies on samovars or tea fountains. We also find swans and dolphins on vessels destined for liquids as shown in Figure 5. The butterfly that is present on sugar bowls (Figure 6) accentuates the sweetness of its content and reflects the art of capricious living for this epoch.

The taste for glory and luxury at

this time also manifested itself with the bourgeoisie who began to imitate the fashions of Napoleon's Empire—though their silver pieces were less elaborate and less expensive.

It is during the Classical Period (in the fourth and fifth centuries BC) when the concept for luxury developed. Roman Emperors commissioned silver vessels with elaborate decorative motifs using precious metals and gemstones. We see a revival of that concept during the First Empire.

The visual language of the First Empire, established by Percier and Fontaine, expressed and manifested the importance and greatness of Napoleon's military conquests and imperial power. Although beyond the scope of this article, Napoleon's political power was a reason for desecration of King Louis XIII's (1601-1643) tomb. Two life-size silver gilt angels made by French sculptors Jacques Sarazin (1592-1660) and Guillaume Coustou (1677-1746) for the Jesuit church, were saved by conservator Alexandre Lenoir (1761-1839) during the French Revolution, flanked each side of the king's tomb. The angels held a vase said to contain the heart of King Louis XIII and Louis XIV. In 1806, after the advice of Vivant Denon, director of the Louvre Museum and artistic advisor of the Emperor, these two angel statues were ordered by Napoleon to be melted down in order to reuse the silver for another purpose, the commemorative Peace statue (Peace of Amiens between Britain and France) created by French sculptor Antoine-Denis Chaudet (1763-1810).

At the same time, a representation of the capricious desires of the society



Fig. 8. (Above) Sweet meat dish by Marc Jacquart (active 1798-1820), vermeil, Paris, 1798. This piece shows a fine chiseling of lotus flowers (water lilies) on the cover and its saucer. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.



Fig. 7. Coffee pot by an unknown Parisian silversmith, silver and ebony, Paris, 1809-1819. This coffee pot shows a popular use of the palm leaf as an appliqué that was incorporated in the legs carrying the body of the coffee pot at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Beaux Arts, Rouen.

Fig. 9. Cruet set by unidentified Parisian silversmith, silver, Paris, circa 1809-1819. The cruet set features the palmettes as a decorative motif throughout its design. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Beaux Arts, Rouen.



of this epoch reflected those of the gods of Greco-Roman mythology.

The adaptation of selected Greek myths as decorative motifs during the First Empire occurred for various reasons. As a result of the French Revolution, French Empire society was

torn between the reality of life ordered by a new political structure and laws and their capricious desires, marked by sensuality and spirituality. The first reason was that this new society needed a restructuring and stability after the Revolution. Returning to Classical antiquity, a traditionally structured society ruled by great Emperors



Fig. 10. Glass refresher by Jean-François Nicolas Carron (active 1775-1812), silver, gold leaf, Paris, circa 1798-1809. This piece in the shape of a cantharus and presents an architectural Greek fret. This type of vessel was used the same way as a bottle cooler is today, except that the glasses were placed upside down into the notches present on the edge. It is important to remember that until Louis XVI, there was a limit of glasses at the table. Every guest had one drinking vessel and when there were different types of wines the waiter had to "refresh" each guest's glass before the new drink was poured. It is during the nineteenth century that table services expand and every guest benefits of several different glasses. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.



Fig. 11. Samovar or water fountain by Nicolas Richard Masson (active 1798-1812), silver, Paris, 1798-1809. This piece features decorative motifs such as doves and the fleur-de-lis from a different period. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.



Fig. 12. Cruet holder by Jean-Pierre Bibron (active 1798-1810), silver, Paris, circa 1810. This cruet holder shows Apollo riding a panther, a very rare decorative motif during the French Empire period. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Beaux Arts, Rouen.



Fig. 13. Sugar bowl by Germain Louis Leblond (active 1799-1809), silver, glass, Paris, 1809-1819. This silver piece uses the violet flower, a decorative motif from the precedent century as the handle of the cover. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.



Fig. 14. Double salt cellar by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odiot (1763-1850), vermeil, Paris, circa 1806. This salt cellar clearly shows the evolution of the shell decorative motif that was popular during the Louis XV period and had a revival at the beginning and at the end of the First Empire. Photograph courtesy of Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.



Fig. 15. Sugar bowl by François-Joseph Luchaire (active 1806-1810), vermeil and crystal, Paris, circa 1809. This sugar bowl features the pineapple, an unusual decorative motif for the period. Photograph courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

made sense and gave people stability. An additional reason for adaptation of the Greek myths is that Napoleon succeeded in establishing a continuity of traditions and manners of the ancient monarchy by restructuring them for his First Empire style.

Decorative motifs are placed with a certain frequency on silver objects depending on several facts: the owner of the silver piece whether Emperor or bourgeois; the use of the silver item for official or private use; the production date of the object (objects at the beginning of the First Empire were produced with slightly different decorative motifs than objects produced at the end of this period due to an evolution of style); and the bourgeoisie's taste and fashion.

The most used decorative motifs throughout the First Empire were lion feet (Figure 7, 12, 14), palm leaves, water leaves and leaves of water lilies (Figure 8), and palmettes (Figure 9). Less often used decorative motifs during the period were the Greek architectural frets (Figure 10). Some symbols used during the First Empire, but belonging to a different period, include the dove and fleur-de-lis (Figure 11), panther (Figure 12), violet (Figure 13), shell (Figure 14), and pineapple (Figure 15).

The development of ornamentation throughout the First Empire is not only evident, but the style itself changes and evolves during the ten-year duration. The style reproduces repetitive designs,

sometimes identical to previous decorative motifs but used in different combinations, or with reworked elements. The shell motif, fashionable under Louis XV, lost its popularity as a decorative motif at the beginning but was rediscovered towards the end of the First Empire, as seen in Figure 14 and in the drawings of Jean-Baptiste-Claude Odiot.

This phenomenon is a type of recurrence that establishes all styles in the history of art. It is endless and can be compared with the functioning of our DNA, changing and evolving—

continuously creating various combinations. In ancient Greece, the people understood the change of time being an endless recurrence. While the Greeks saw the time as a cycle always reproducing, the Judeo-Christian culture saw the change of time as a

progressively linear development. This eternal recurrence was conceptualized by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) under the name "Lehre der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen"⁶ (the eternal recurrence) at the end of the nineteenth century and

explains the reappearance of certain types of decorative motifs that reveal the history of all cultures. Today, we continue to see decorative motifs made popular during the French Empire period.

Notes

1. Stéphane Faniel, *Collection Connaissance des Arts, le XIXe siècle français*, Vol. II (Paris: Hachette, 1957), 101.

2. Karolina Stefanski, *La specialization de l'orfèvrerie sous le Premier Empire*, Vol. I. Master thesis 1, Sorbonne University Paris 1, June 2011. This subject and the change of France's traditional silversmith system is featured in this thesis.

3. A *nefis* is an elaborate table decoration in the shape of a ship and serves as the holder of table napkins and condiments used by kings in France.

4. Odile Nouvel-Kammerer, "Discours de l'ornement sous l'Empire," *L'aigle et le Papillon: Symbols des pouvoirs de Napoléon, 1800-1815* (Paris & New York: Paris et l'American Federation of Arts, 2007).

5. Charles Percier and Pierre François Leonard Fontaine, *Le Recueil de Décorations Intérieures* (Paris: Jules Didot aîné, 1827).

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (Leipzig: E.W. Fritzsche, 1872).

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Karolina Stefanski, of German and of Polish descent, graduated from Suffolk University in Boston with a B.A. in Journalism. Quadrilingual, she began her career managing a renowned fine art gallery in New York after which she returned to Europe to pursue her graduate studies. Stefanski completed her M.A. in art history, specializing in nineteenth century silver, from Sorbonne University in Paris, and is a Ph.D. candidate at the Technical University of Berlin. She writes on a freelance basis and is a practicing silversmith.